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Rivkah Lambert Adler, who founded Torah School for the Nations earlier in 2018. "Many of these Christians see the Jewish people as leaders in Bible scholarship." Credit: Emil Salman

**Israel News**

## Yeshiva for Christians? New Crop of Jewish Learning Centers Caters to Different Sort of Believer

Whether online or at actual brick-and-mortar facilities in the Holy Land, thousands of evangelical Christians are increasingly turning to Jewish educators in pursuit of 'authentic





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## A yeshiva for Christians?

Strange as it sounds, some Christians prefer getting their Bible lessons from Jewish teachers – ideally, Orthodox rabbis. Evidence that such demand is on the rise can be found in the growing number of initiatives cropping up around Israel with this particular audience in mind.

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“It’s become a phenomenon,” says Rivkah Lambert Adler, an Orthodox-Jewish educator who is active in several such ventures. “What we’re seeing is a profound hunger and thirst among Christians for authentic Torah teaching,” adds the 59-year-old.

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By Christians she mainly means evangelical Christians, who tend to take the Bible very literally and see events playing out in Israel these days as fulfillment of its prophecies.

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“Many of these Christians see the Jewish people as leaders in Bible scholarship and as



their own faith," says Lambert Adler, who published a book on the subject last year called "Ten From the Nations: Torah Awakening Among Non-Jews."

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The title is based on a biblical verse she believes has inspired this new trend: "Thus saith the Lord of hosts: In those days it shall come to pass, that 10 men shall take hold, out of all the languages of the nations, shall even take hold of the skirt of him that is a Jew, saying: We will go with you, for we have heard that God is with you" (Zechariah 8:23).

Root Source, one of the first ventures of its kind, was launched in April 2014 by Gidon Ariel, an Orthodox Jew, and Bob O'Dell, a Christian philanthropist and high-tech entrepreneur.



For up to \$27 a month or \$270 a year (there are three pricing levels, “in the spirit of Leviticus 5:6–11”), subscribers to Root Source can access prerecorded lectures on topics that include biblical Hebrew, women in the Bible, Jewish prayer, the Holy Temple, God, Moses and the Book of Proverbs.

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Although it may be a bit off-topic, one of the most popular courses offered at this online school is apparently “Islam – Insights and Deceptions.” A blurb about the course notes that it “uses scriptures from the Old Testament and occasionally even the New Testament to make the case that Islam is extremely dangerous.”

Torah School for the Nations, founded by Lambert Adler earlier this year, focuses more on face-to-face learning. Her project offers evangelicals visiting Israel during the three biblical feasts – Passover, Shavuot and Sukkot – the opportunity to participate in a full day of Torah study.

It held its first such teach-in last Passover in the West Bank settlement of Ma’aleh Adumim, where Lambert Adler lives. “But so many people wanted to join that the next two times, for lack of space, we had to move it to Jerusalem,” she says. The price is \$75 per participant per day, including a kosher lunch.

“Ultimately, my dream is to have a brick-and-mortar facility that operates year-round,” she says.

### ‘A few thousand’ participants

Yeshiva for the Nations, launched about a year ago, bills itself as “an online academy that offers authentic Torah classes designed for non-Jews.” Like Root Source, it is a Jewish-Christian partnership. The Jewish partner, Rabbi Tuly Weisz, is an Orthodox rabbi who immigrated to Israel from the United States and has been engaged ever since in creating bridges between Israel and the international evangelical community. His other endeavors include publishing *TorahLife* – a daily news – distributed to some 250,000 Christians



with a rags-to-riches story in which she made a killing in high-tech. The 59-year-old recently moved from Hawaii to Israel.

"God had a plan for me, and the same is true of Israel and the Jewish people," she says.



Yeshiva for the Nations founders Rabbi Tuly Weiss and Donna Jollay, an evangelical Christian. It was Jollay who was determined to use the word "yeshiva" in their name. Credit: Emil Salman

Since experiencing a "spiritual awakening" about 20 years ago – in which she claims Jesus appeared before her – Jollay has become a devout Christian. She signs off every email she writes with the biblical verse from Genesis that explains why evangelicals like her are so devoted to the Jewish people: "God blesses those who bless the children of Israel" (which is how many evangelicals interpret Genesis 12:3: "And I will bless them that bless thee").

The list of prerecorded online courses offered by Yeshiva for the Nations includes Bible 101, End of Days studies, Introductory Judaism for non-Jews and Israel's Seven Holy Cities. Plans are also underway to offer online webinars that would allow students to interact with their teachers in real time.

The most recent addition to the growing list of Christian yeshivas in Israel is Align With Zion.

This brand-new enterprise was founded by AnaRina Heymann, a former marketing executive for the City of David archaeological site in Jerusalem who made aliyah to Israel



Align With Zion is not yet in full swing, having launched only in October, but Heymann says her plan is to provide both online and live lectures on topics that include the fulfillment of biblical prophecy, Hebrew language, the Jewish festivals and the centrality of Jerusalem in the biblical narrative.

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“There is a genuine and growing wave of interest from pro-Israel Christians, and we have a responsibility to respond and engage through the common ground of biblical narrative – which in turn provides them with advocacy tools to stand with us against the growing wave of anti-Semitism in the world,” she says.

Lambert Adler notes that hundreds, if not thousands, of Jewish studies programs – catering to different levels of religiosity and knowledge – exist in Israel. The problem, she says, is that enrollment is restricted. “If you’re not Jewish, most of these places are off-limits to you,” she says.

All told, Lambert Adler estimates that “a few thousand” Christians have participated in classes offered by this new crop of yeshivas now open to them. But she believes the potential is far greater and that if anything is preventing it from being realized, it is not a lack of students but a lack of teachers.

“The pool of teachers who are Jewishly knowledgeable, who are English-speaking and who are willing to engage with non-Jews is relatively small,” she explains. The fact that there is considerable overlap in the faculty lists of these schools is, therefore, no coincidence.

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Asked if Orthodox Jews are sometimes reluctant to share their religious knowledge with Christians, Lambert Adler responds: "That would be an understatement. The Jewish people, by and large, are very defensive about Christians. We tend not to trust them, we tend to think they have a missionizing agenda 100 percent of the time, and we tend to want them to just leave us alone."

### Knesset Bible classes

The forerunner of all these initiatives was the Center for Jewish-Christian Understanding & Cooperation (CJCUC), the first Orthodox-Jewish institution to offer Jewish-taught Bible classes to Christians. CJCUC was established in January 2008 by Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, a prominent Modern Orthodox rabbi, in the West Bank settlement of Efrat.

Unlike some of the newer initiatives, it reaches out to Christians across all denominations – not only evangelicals.

Interfaith Bible classes have also found their way to the Israeli parliament. Among the participants at a recent class in May was Michele Bachmann, the former U.S. presidential candidate and co-founder of the ultra-conservative Tea Party movement.





Rosemary Schindler Garlow, left, Pastor Jim Garlow and MK Yehudah Glick (Likud) at an interfaith Bible class in the Knesset, May 13, 2018. Credit: Olivier Fitoussi

The driving force behind the Knesset initiative, which began last February, is a California-based evangelical organization known as the Schindler Society, founded by megachurch Pastor Jim Garlow and his wife Rosemary Schindler Garlow.

Lambert Adler profiles several dozen Christians in her book, including Jollay, who are “in some sort of relationship with Torah.” In most cases, the desire to study with Jewish teachers comes at a relatively advanced stage of the spiritual and theological progression these Christians experience, Lambert Adler notes.

“Part of what’s happening is that people coming from Christian backgrounds are connecting to Israel first, often because they’re very biblical-literate and literal, and God promised to give the Land of Israel back to the Jewish people – and they see that that has happened,” she says.

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"Once they start having what they call a 'heart for Israel,' they realize that Jesus was Jewish. And in order for them to understand Christianity, they have to understand the Hebraic roots of Christianity. In other words, the lifestyle that Jesus lived – and that happens to be very similar to the way religious Jews live today, especially in Israel," explains Lambert Adler.

"So it's a process that starts with being intrigued by Israel," she continues, "then being intrigued by the Hebraic roots of Christian faith, and then learning the Bible from the people who they see are the natural continuation of Jesus' life."

While Christian yeshivas may be a new trend, Jason M. Olson – an expert on evangelical attitudes toward Israel – believes it was Israel's military victory in 1967 that paved the way.

"The Six-Day War [which saw Israel occupy the West Bank and East Jerusalem] kind of put Jews back into history for evangelicals – and when I say history, I mean sacred history," says Olson, author of the just published "America's Road to Jerusalem: The Impact of the Six-Day War on Protestant Politics."

As a first step, he says, evangelicals began to understand that Jewish studies had merit as an academic discipline – and that included the Jewish interpretation of the Bible.

"With the Jews re-entering sacred history and the Bible having something to say about modern Jewish people, then it follows that modern Jewish people have something to say about the Bible," says Olson. "I think that's where this sort of transformation occurs: That maybe we need Jews to teach us about the Jewish Bible."

When Weisz and Jollay were trying to come up with a name for their new venture, it was she, the Christian partner, who was determined to use the word "yeshiva."

"Rabbi Tuly was concerned that many Christians might not be familiar with the term," she recounts. "So I said to him, 'But that's just 'oint – I want to raise the standards.'"



It's clear who won that argument in the end. "Don't forget," she says with a chuckle, "I had the financial leverage."

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